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## A DAY ON THE LAGO DI GARDA

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Why do so few travelers visit the Lago di Garda and why in Bagot's book on the Italian Lakes is no account taken of its beauty? Catullus, Tennyson, Carducci conspire to make Lake Benacus famous, but its associations are overlooked, its loveliness slighted.

I shall never forget the unexpected joy of it. We had spent the night of July 18 in Brescia for the sake of a thrilling bronze Victory in the Museo Patrio and about noon we took a train for Desenzano. The time of the siesta was upon us and we chatted languidly, when suddenly I felt as though I had received an electrical shock. Something gave way deep within. There, from the train window, I saw the shining blue waters of di Garda and stretching out into them like a long, index finger, Catullus' Sirmio.

We took a train to the dock at Desenzano, then boarded the steamer for Sirmione. It was a short sail, spent in taking pictures to help the mind's eye preserve the wonder of the nearer and nearer view of the slender strip of land. The town of Sirmione seemed placed in about the center of the peninsula—a little fishing village it is of some five hundred souls. We left our baggage at the Hotel Sirmione at the water's edge, allured first by the garden, then by the quotations from Catullus, Tennyson, and Carducci on its walls, and there we were presented by a grave proprietor with a small pamphlet labeled *Historical-Tourist Guidebook with Medical Note by Dr. Benedetto Ferrara*, which extols in equally glowing words the thermal baths and the Roman ruins, the opportunities for fishing and the love of Catullus!

But we did not read our giftbooks then, for we could hardly wait a moment for our walk around the peninsula. There is a mediaeval castle with a moat and drawbridge near the hotel, but that day mediaevalism could not detain us. Sirmione has one main street, narrow and picturesque. The houses are close together

and that neighborliness is extended by their occupants sitting out in front of them, their chairs on the stone pavement. Children and kittens were playing about. Men were winding fish-nets on reels. Fruit vendors were offering from large baskets yellow plums and red cherries. Two withered crones stretched out to us, in long, bony hands, colored post cards. No one begged. The place was poor, simple, primitive.

Our walk was hot as we left the shade of the houses and went out the peninsula over the sandy road. We passed the Cortine Hill with the modern villa half hidden in the greenness of its summit, and stopped a little farther on for a moment to see the tiny gray church of San Pietro. In existence in the eighth century, rebuilt in the fourteenth, it has a miniature dignity which befits its age, and a simplicity which suits the community near.

Sorge del colle in vetta e fra le verdi  
 Fronde di sparsi ulivi, umile un tempio  
 A Pier di Galilea. Povero il tetto  
 E povero l'altar.

Our rocky path led now through olive groves. Under the trees small scarlet poppies were in bloom, sometimes in clusters, sometimes in a wide blaze of color. We came to the end of the peninsula and saw again the blue lake. We were high on a bluff above the water. There are massive Roman ruins here stretching wide across the peninsula and tradition has given them the name of the "Grotto of Catullus," has even labeled one room "Lesbia's Bath," but the building is not of Catullus' time and the massive arches and multiplex chambers are not those of a private house. Perhaps even in the early centuries of the Empire the waters of Benacus were found medicinal and there were here great *thermae*, the prototype of the Royal Thermal Bath House described eloquently by Dottore Benedetto Ferrara in our *Historical-Tourist Guidebook*. Whether the ruins were substructures of some enormous building or not we could not tell, but we rejoiced in the beauty of their gray stone arches overgrown with little ferns, purple blossoms, trailing ivy—great rounded arches framing in pictures of gray-green olives against a background of brilliantly blue water.

We sat down finally on the grassy edge of the cliff with a view up the lake and across to the high, blue mountains of the eastern coast. White clouds were re-forming and shifting above the mountains. A boat with orange-colored sails pointed like swallows' wings was skimming across the bay. The blue water far below us shimmered to greens and violets near the shore, and over its varying colors the sunshine danced in gold.

It was there that we read Catullus' perfect poem, felt how he had voiced the spirit of joy in the place, and knew how wonderful a fortune his had been—to have Sirmio for his love when Lesbia failed.

Paene insularum, Sirmio, insularumque  
ocelle, quascumque in liquentibus stagnis  
marique vasto fert uterque Neptunus,  
quam te libenter quamque laetus in viso,  
vix mi ipse credens Thyniam atque Bithynos  
liquisse campos et videre te in tuto.  
o, quid solutis est beatius curis,  
cum mens onus reponit, ac peregrino  
labore fessi venimus larem ad nostrum  
desideratoque acquiescimus lecto!  
hoc est, quod unumst pro laboribus tantis.  
salve, o venusta Sirmio, atque ero gaude:  
gaudete vosque, o liquidæ lacus undæ;  
ridete, quidquid est domi cachinnorum.

Half-islet Sirmio, the gem of all

The isles, which god of sea or god of mere  
Upholds in glossy lake or ocean drear,  
On thee with heart and soul my glances fall.

Scarce can I think me safe when I recall

Bithynia's plains afar and see thee near:

Ah, what more joyous than the mind to clear  
Of care, and burdens lay aside that gall?

By distant travail worn we win our hearth

And on the long-wished couch siesta take:

This is the one reward for those who roam.

Hail, Sirmio, the fair! Greet me with mirth;

Be mirthful, Lydian waters of the lake!

Laugh out, ye realms of merriment at home!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Translated by J. W. Duff.

We read Tennyson's poem, too, but for all his vivid description, his strain seemed too mournful for the spot:

Row us out from Desenzano, to your Sirmione row!  
 So they row'd, and there we landed—"O *venusta Sirmio!*"  
 There to me thro' all the groves of olive in the summer glow,  
 There beneath the Roman ruin where the purple flowers grow,  
 Came that "*Ave atque Vale*" of the Poet's hopeless woe,  
 Tenderest of Roman poets nineteen hundred years ago,  
 "*Frater Ave atque Vale*"—as we wander'd to and fro  
 Gazing at the Lydian laughter of the Garda Lake below  
 Sweet Catullus's all-but-island, olive-silvery Sirmio!

Touching reminiscence! But the melancholy is too sustained for Catullus' youth. Was it not when he was coming back from the Troad and that sad visit to his brother's tomb—after his consuming passion for Lesbia had burned out into sparkless ashes—that he wrote of his homecoming with such ardent joy?

Iam mens praetrepidans avet vagari,  
 iam laeti studio pedes vigescunt.

Now the eager mind longs to wander; now the happy feet are thrilled with desire.

No! Catullus' woe was surely not "hopeless," and the fine ardor of his youth, undimmed by fraternal grief and passionate disillusionment, reasserted itself on his return to the place he adored. His mind *could* put off its burden. He could rest again in the dear familiarity of Sirmio's beauty. He could exult with her laughing waters.

We lingered long in silence, and the poignancy of our feeling (sharpened by the beauty of the place, memories of Catullus' passion, and swift retrospect of past hours) was so great that it was a relief, when we started back along the east side of the peninsula, to come upon a tiny shack where a smiling Italian woman with crinkly, grizzled hair and long gold earrings promised us *tè* and *biscotti inglesi*! We sat down at a round table under a mulberry tree and an olive between two small cornfields where the scarlet poppies ran riot. Ahead of us was the blue lake. Behind us was some Roman pavement, narrow, red bricks fitted in a V-shaped

pattern. A break in them led down to an underground Roman room, undoubtedly used now as a wine cellar by our hostess!

She came out of the shack presently bearing on a tray a ridiculously tall teapot, bits of some green lemons, sugar, and little fresh cakes. As we drank, we watched the lizards dart over the rocks in the sun. At the end there was much jollity because the Italian woman must count the *biscotti* eaten, and behold! All were eaten but three! And the various little cakes had various prices, so it was necessary for the crinkly-haired one to set down a long column of figures to calculate the five lire due her; but our appetites gave her much joy.

We walked back then to Sirmio, the lake always at our left, the olive grove at our right. Again we passed the high villa, came to the narrow street of the town, and reached our hotel in time for an early dinner in the garden. Then we took the steamer for an evening ride up the lake's thirty-two miles.

The boat follows the east side, stopping at point after point—Manerba, Salo, Gardone, Maderno, Gargnano—all musical names. High mountains slope down to the water's edge, seemingly begrudging man even the narrow line which the towns occupy at their base. We stayed at the stern of the boat first, to have the last possible view of Sirmio's point. Then ahead was the Isola di Garda, a crescent island with the stately villa of the Princess Scipione Borghese and her tall cypresses making a dream picture in the soft sunset haze. There was hardly any color in the sunset, only the faintest pink when the sun went down, and night dropped dark between the mountains suddenly. Before that came, however, our eyes feasted on picture after picture of villas—old rose, yellow, white—set against green trees above the water, terraced gardens below them with marble statues and a wealth of flowers. There were stretches and stretches of lemon trees, too, on terraces on the hills, with white pillars shining among them (the pillars which support wooden covers for the sensitive trees in winter time).

Toward the north end of the lake the mountains are very precipitous and massive, and as we approached in the dark the whole aspect was black and forbidding, unlike the smiling blue

Garda of the afternoon. We could imagine, then, Benacus in storm as Vergil saw her:

Fluctibus et fremitu adsurgens Benace marino.<sup>1</sup>

Our boat kept close to the mountains and they towered above us in almost oppressive height and grandeur. Presently two government customs boats began playing powerful searchlights up and down both sides of the coast, hunting for smugglers. Austria owns about twelve kilometers of the lake at the north and the smugglers try to get goods over the line in rowboats along that dangerous coast, working often on stormy nights and hiding their booty in caves. We seemed, as our eyes followed those long, gleaming arms of the law stretched out after the lawbreakers, to be watching some modern detective story, twenty centuries surely away from Catullus, a world's distance from Sirmio.

We were ready at last to land out of the dark and find in the Hotel Riva a resting-place. As we went to our rooms in a quiet, remote wing, we passed through a garden where the scent of roses greeted us and the sound of a fountain's falling water.

We were glad that our last view of the Lago di Garda was not the oppressive one of the night. On the next day, as we went by train down the east side of the lake to Verona, Catullus' birth-place, before the long ridge of Monte Baldo hid di Garda from view we had a magnificent picture of the lake framed between high mountains, brilliant again, radiant, thrilling to mind and feet and heart even of those who were not poets. And we thanked Catullus, for whose sake we had gone to see so fair a place.

<sup>1</sup> *Georgics* ii. 160.